A

DISCOURSE

ON A CHRISTIAN PROFESSION,

DELIVERED AT

BROOKLINE,

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IMMEDIATELY BEFORE THE CELEBRATION OF

The Lord's Supper,

BY JOHN PIERCE, A. M.

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THE Author affectionately dedicates this plain diſcourſe to the people of his charge, who requeſt its publication; ſincerely praying, while it recommends obſervance of the *forms*, that, like a faithful monitor, it may awaken a more lively attention to the *ſubſtance* of true religion.

ECCLESIASTES v. 4, 5.

When thou voweſt a vow unto God, defer not to pay it. For he hath no pleaſure in fools. Pay that, which thou haſt vowed. Better is it, that thou ſhouldeſt not vow, than that thou ſhouldeſt vow, and not pay.

IT was a cuſtom among the Iſraelites to make vows unto Jehovah. In theſe they uſually had reference to ſome deſired good; and they ſolemnly engaged, on receiving it, to fulfil their promiſes. Before it was made, the vow was optional; but being ſtipulated, nothing could diſſolve the engagement. In confirmation of this truth it is ſaid in Deuteronomy, *When thou ſhalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou ſhalt not ſlack to pay it. For the Lord thy God will ſurely require it of thee; and it would be ſin in thee. But, if thou ſhalt forbear to vow, it ſhall be no ſin in thee.*

To this cuſtom the wiſe man may be ſuppoſed to refer in the text. But its language will naturally admit a more extenſive ſignification. It may well apply to every ſolemn engagement, into which man enters with his Maker. Thus, under the moſaic diſpenſation it required thoſe, who had entered into covenant with God, to comply with its terms, as delivered by the Almighty to Moſes. On the diſciples of Jeſus Chriſt it enjoins the obſervance of whatſoever he has commanded.

It will, therefore, comport both with the ſubject and the occaſion, if I conſider a chriſtian profeſſion in the light of a religious vow, and ſhow as well our obligation to make it, as the important duties it involves, when made.

I. A public chriſtian profeſſion, it cannot be doubted, is a religious vow; and it is a vow of the moſt ſerious and ſignificant import. It is a ſolemn declaration of our repentance of ſin and faith in the Savior. It is an acknowledgment of the truth of the ſacred ſcriptures in general; and, with humble reliance on *help obtained of God*, it is a reſolution to lead a virtuous and holy life.

Conſider, alſo, the ſolemnity uſually attending the profeſſion. It is expreſsly made in the preſence of God and our fellow-beings. It ſeems thus to call heaven and earth by ſolemn appeal to witneſs the ſincerity of our engagement. How is it poſſible, therefore, to conceive of obligations toward either God or man more ſtrict or more ſolemn, than are thus impoſed?

This ſacred profeſſion may, indeed, be undertaken, and, we have reaſon to fear, is often made without due conſideration. For what is not liable to abuſe! Yet this ſacrilegious perverſion does not alter the nature, nor diminiſh the obligation of what is ſo ſeriouſly promiſed. Contracts between man and man, when formally made, are always conſidered binding, whatever may have been the motives, or how remiſs ſoever the attention of the promiſer. Much leſs can it excuſe the neglect or the breach of our pious obligations, that they were aſſumed without conſidering their ſacred import, their awful reality.

The forms of admiſſion to chriſtian privileges, it may be obſerved, are various in different churches. Some require aſſent to long, intricate, unintelligible creeds, and demand a

minute relation of perſonal experiences in religion. Others impoſe no formal terms of communion ; and admit to chriſtian ordinances without an explicit profeſſion of faith, and without any verbal pious engagements or reſolutions. But, in whatever way theſe ordinances are adminiſtered, whether with or without an expreſs church covenant, the ſubjects of them may be ſaid, either virtually or explicitly, to have taken the vows of God upon them. The mode of admiſſion into chriſtian fellowſhip may vary ; but where ſuch fellowſhip is underſtood in any way to ſubſiſt, the conſequent obligations muſt be nearly ſimilar. In making a covenant with my Maker, it cannot be eſſential to do it by words. He, who knows all the ſecret ſprings in the ſoul, will infer it from my actions, when I obſerve thoſe inſtitutions, which neceſſarily preſuppoſe faith in his Son.

This ſentiment is recogniſed in the platform of church diſcipline, eſtabliſhed by our venerable and pious anceſtors ſo early, as the year 1648, which has in repeated inſtances been openly, and ever ſince tacitly acknowledged, as the conſtitution of our congregational churches. " This voluntary agreement, conſent, or covenant," ſay its judicious and

candid framers in the fourth ſection of the fourth chapter, "although the more expreſs and plain it is, the more fully it puts us in mind of our mutual duty, and ſtirreth us up to it, and leaveth leſs room for the queſtioning of the truth of the church eſtate of a company of profeſſors, and the truth of memberſhip of particular perſons; yet, we conceive, the ſubſtance of it is kept, where there is a real agreement or conſent of a company of faithful perſons to meet conſtantly together in one congregation for the public worſhip of God, and their mutual edification; which real agreement and conſent they do expreſs by their conſtant practice in coming together for the public worſhip of God, and by their religious ſubjection to the ordinances of God there; the rather, if we conſider, how ſcripture covenants have been entered into not only expreſsly by word of mouth, but by ſacrifice, by hand-writing and ſeal, and alſo ſometimes by ſilent conſent without any writing or expreſſion of words at all."

Hence a chriſtian profeſſion may be made without an open and formal acknowledgment of allegiance to Chriſt. But, in whatever way made, it amounts to a religious vow, which

we are bound by the moſt ſacred ties not to violate.

It may be argued by ſome, that chriſtianity is addreſſed to us, as rational beings ; and we are at liberty to embrace or reject it. If we perceive not ſufficient reaſon to adopt it, and, of courſe, lay ourſelves under no voluntary engagements to obey its injunctions, we are not anſwerable for neglecting it.

II. This leads me to conſider our obligations to make a chriſtian profeſſion, to enter into covenant with our Maker.

Some may be imboldened by the language of the text joined with an earneſt deſire of ſelf-vindication to conclude, becauſe vows among the Iſraelites, ſo all kinds of religious engagements are optional. But this would be a concluſion at once raſh and dangerous. It is allowed, that certain kinds of vows were left diſcretionary with the children of Iſrael. At the ſame time there was a covenant with Jehovah, which they were bound to make, and to ſubmit to a rite, as a ſeal of its ratification. The perſon, who ſhould ſtubbornly refuſe compliance with this duty, was by exemplary puniſhment to be *cut off from the people.*

We cannot reaſonably ſuppoſe, that Deity would enforce the moſaical more carefully, than the chriſtian covenant, eſpecially, when we conſider the univerſal extent of the latter, while the former more immediately reſpected the Iſraelites; if we alſo reflect, that the rationality of the one is far leſs obvious, than that of the other.

It will not be denied, that chriſtianity is addreſſed to us as rational beings; and on this ground, it is contended, it challenges the attention, and claims the acceptance of every one qualified to examine it. It relates the riſe and progreſs of a religion, which from ſmall beginnings has gradually increaſed, and which promiſes to overſpread the world. It preſents the prophecies, which have at various periods been fulfilled in its confirmation; and it declares to us others, which ſhall certainly be accompliſhed. It unfolds the moſt ſtupendous miracles ſaid to be wrought in its defence. In fine, it portrays the Savior in all his celeſtial glories, who has enjoined the acknowledgment of his character, the reception of his religion, and obedience to his laws. Among theſe not the leaſt conſiderable is to *confeſs* him *before men*. Had this been a merely

arbitrary appointment, were there no valid reaſons to recommend the duty, there would be no impropriety, nay, we ſhould be perfectly juſtified in neglecting it. But, ſince the public profeſſion of our faith in Chriſt is ſo evidently required by our Savior and his apoſtles, ſince it is calculated to anſwer valuable purpoſes, ſince there is every thing, which the nature of the caſe will admit, to demand our faith, it is unjuſtifiable to withhold it.

Whenever the divine Immanuel wrought miracles on his followers, as he thus intended to lay the foundation of his religion in the world, he invariably made faith in himſelf a prerequiſite. The apoſtles and firſt preachers of chriſtianity required the exerciſe and the declaration of the ſame faith, before perſons were admitted to the ordinance of baptiſm, and were thus *added to the church. Believe on the Lord Jeſus Chriſt, and thou ſhalt be ſaved. If thou ſhalt confeſs with thy mouth the Lord Jeſus, and believe in thine heart, that God hath raiſed him from the death, thou ſhalt be ſaved.* In ſuch plain and peremptory language, as this, do the primitive apoſtles and diſciples of Chriſt repreſent the neceſſity of poſſeſſing and declaring faith in the Savior.

But ſome kind of chriſtian profeſſion will appear reaſonable, agreeably to the nature and fitneſs of things, if we conſider that, without it, there can be no regularly formed church, and no church power of chriſtians mutually over one another. Hence the conſtitution before cited maintains, that " Saints by calling muſt have a viſible political union among themſelves; or, elſe, they are not yet a particular church, as thoſe ſimilitudes hold forth, which the ſcriptures make uſe of to ſhow the nature of particular churches, as a body, a building, a houſe. Hands, eyes, feet, and other members muſt be united, or, elſe, remaining ſeparate, are not a body. Stone, timber, though ſquared, hewn, and poliſhed are not a houſe, till they are compacted and united, ſo ſaints, or believers in judgment of charity, are not a church, unleſs orderly knit together." For ſuch reaſons we find, that churches were immediately founded, after their great Head had aſcended on high; and that they were regularly initiated by profeſſing their faith, and by receiving baptiſm for themſelves and houſeholds. In this way were formed the churches at Corinth, Galatia, Theſſalonica, and the others mentioned in the New Teſtament.

Indeed the formation of churches by uniting fellow-chriſtians into corporate bodies is agreeable to the modes and cuſtoms generally obſerved among mankind. Is any particular ſcience to be encouraged? We ſee men forming themſelves into ſocieties ſubject to regulations, which they voluntarily engage to obſerve for the promotion of their object. In like manner the arts and other uſeful purpoſes of life are encouraged and advanced. But ſhall ſuch meaſures be taken to ſubſerve our preſent intereſt; and ſhall not ſimilar exertions be employed about our future everlaſting concerns? Shall ſelfiſh or benevolent objects engage our attention; and ſhall we deem of leſs importance the advancement of piety? Shall we beſtow ſuch unwearied pains to become uſeful citizens of this world; and ſhall leſs be thought neceſſary to render us *fellow-citizens with the ſaints, and of the houſhold of faith?*

It is objected by ſome to our common mode of admitting church members, that it requires what is unreaſonable. Creeds, it is ſaid, are impoſed, to which no rational chriſtian can aſſent. This objection may poſſibly lie againſt ſome churches, which are too ſcru-

pulous about modes of faith. But it is queſtioned, whether, as applied to our churches in general, it has the leaſt foundation. Moſt of our covenants are expreſſed in ſimple ſcriptural language, and require only a belief of what the ſacred records indiſputably reveal. How, then, can any, who profeſs to believe divine revelation, conſiſtently object to a covenant, which propoſes the ſacred truths of the Bible for its foundation and guide, and whoſe grand deſign is the advancement of evangelical holineſs and virtue? The platform of church diſcipline, on which our covenants are founded, may have its imperfections. But they are the imperfections of a ſyſtem, which has been the glory of our churches, and which long experience has demonſtrated to produce the moſt ſalutary effects. Why, then, ſhould any object to what is ſo certain a good, at the hazard of involving us, for the ſake of doubtful reformation, in novel untried evils?

But others plead in excuſe for not taking on them the obligations of the chriſtian covenant the language of the text; *Better is it, that thou ſhouldeſt not vow, than that thou ſhouldeſt vow, and not pay.* It cannot be doubted, that the

latter is a greater evil, than the former. But is the fear of ſin a good reaſon, why we ſhould omit duty? Can it be ſuppoſed, that our benevolent and righteous Lawgiver has placed us in ſuch circumſtances, that, in avoiding one ſin, we muſt neceſſarily fall into another? Rather let us look for ſome inconſiſtency in ourſelves, than pretend ſuch an abſurd contradiction in the moral government of God. Let us rather ſuppoſe the abſurdity to be this. Men are deterred by ſome improper motives from making a chriſtian profeſſion; and then quiet themſelves in the belief, that they thus avoid a greater ſin. What ſerves to increaſe their remiſſneſs and ſelf-complacency is the appearance of a good motive, though it leads to omiſſion of a known duty. They ſee others violate the moſt ſacred engagements, and bring diſgrace on the cauſe, they had ſolemnly promiſed to defend. They are ſhocked at the ſacrilegious inconſiſtency; and they reſolve to ſhun their guilt by avoiding the poſſibility of incurring it. But their inquiry in this caſe ought not ſo much to be, what do others neglect; as, what is it our duty to perform? The guilt of others ſhould excite circumſpection; and not be alleged to increaſe

ſince it will not excuſe their negligence. If they blame the inconſiſtency of profeſſors, let them ſet a better example, and ſhow their reſpect for injured chriſtianity by reſolving ſincerely to profeſs and faithfully to recommend it in their own lives and converſations.

III. This naturally brings me to ſhow, in the laſt place, the important obligations, which a chriſtian profeſſion impoſes. *When thou voweſt a vow unto God, defer not to pay it. For he hath no pleaſure in fools. Pay that, which thou haſt vowed.*

It cannot be doubted, that profeſſors are moſt ſolemnly bound to lead a chriſtian life. That they will ſtrive to do this, they have in a deliberate manner voluntarily pledged themſelves. They *have vowed a vow unto the Lord, and they cannot go back.* It is naturally, it is juſtly expected of them, both by their brethren and others, that they will frown upon bad principles and evil practices. Great muſt be their condemnation, if, in contempt of the ſolemn vows, they have made, they ſuffer their virtues to be eclipſed by heathen, and even by infidels; if they diſtinguiſh themſelves from the unbelieving world by obſerving thoſe

rites only, which in themſelves are lifeleſs and inſignificant.

Above all, it is indiſpenſably required of chriſtian profeſſors, that they avoid the groſſer vices ; that they *have no fellowſhip with the unfruitful works of darkneſs, but rather reprove them.* Otherwiſe, they are guilty of the moſt abominable ſacrilege, *they blaſpheme that worthy name, by which they are called*, they reflect unmerited diſgrace on the religion of Jeſus, while their own reputation becomes juſtly diſhonored.

Not only by avoiding open vices ſhould profeſſors be exemplary. They ſhould, alſo, live in the habitual practice of thoſe duties, which the world expects them to perform, and which the religion, they profeſs, enjoins. If negligent of virtues, which are the characteriſtical traits of chriſtianity, it will be readily ſuppoſed, that they have aſſumed the chriſtian profeſſion with the vain hope of increaſing their reputation, or of atoning for their vices. But, ſhould either of theſe be their leading motive, how ſadly will they be diſappointed ! For by exhibiting a glaring inconſiſtency between their profeſſion and their practice, they will inevitably loſe credit even with the unprincipled, and,

what is more to be dreaded, they will increaſe their criminality in the view of heaven.

At the preſent period, when there are ſuch daring attempts* to deſtroy the bulwarks of our holy religion, when ſome with malicious rage aim a deadly blow at the very vitals of chriſtianity, and ſo many unintentionally injure its true intereſts by indifference and lukewarmneſs in its cauſe, it certainly becomes the friends of Jeſus to be vigilantly on their guard againſt inſidious deſigns and open aſſaults. They ſhould reſolutely *ſtand in* their *lot*, put on the armor of a good life, and with *the ſword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*, they ſhould encounter all their adverſaries; *above all, taking the ſhield of faith, wherewith* they *may be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.* When ſo many, who are not the open enemies of the goſpel, ſeem, however, by their practice to repreſent the duties of piety as of little or no importance, let chriſtians evince their reality and their efficacy by diligently maintaining them,

* Witneſs a periodical publication at Philadelphia, called "*The Temple of Reaſon*," which by all the arts of low buffoonery, of blaſphemous wit, and of lying intrigue is inceſſantly directed to undermine and deſtroy the chriſtian faith.

and by faithfully displaying their happy fruits. Let them be constant in the private and public worship of God, and suffer no excuse, which would not detain them from the most trivial worldly pursuit, to keep them from paying deserved homage to their Maker in his house. If they grow remiss in the sacred duties of devotion, how can they answer it to their own consciences; how can they expect to avoid the imputation and the punishment of God's broken covenant; how can they expect, that others, who look to them for an example, will escape essential injury by imitating their bad practices?

The subject, in fine, should deeply interest those, who have assented to the covenant with a view to the baptism of their children, and who have hitherto neglected to come, in the instituted way, to *the table of the Lord.* Suffer me, though with plainness, yet with truth to declare, that *the vows of God are upon you.* The covenant, you have ratified with Deity, is the same in substance with that, which gives admission into the church. Custom alone has made a difference. No greater qualifications are requisite for the latter, than for the former. You have sacredly promised "to bring

up your children and all, who are, or may be under your care *in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.*" How can you fulfil this ſolemn engagement, unleſs you diligently inſtruct them in chriſtian principles; and how can you ſucceſsfully inſtruct them in chriſtian principles, unleſs you ſet before them a chriſtian example? Take heed, I entreat you, leſt you undervalue covenant obligations. It is always eſteemed diſgraceful and criminal in a court of juſtice, and in the moſt trivial cauſe, thoughtleſsly or wilfully to be guilty of a falſe oath. How much more criminal and offenſive muſt we ſuppoſe it in the view of your omniſcient Judge impiouſly to perjure yourſelves by taking his covenant into your lips, while it has little or no place in your memories, much leſs in your hearts; and while it does not ſuitably influence your practice? Conſider for your ſerious admonition, better is it, that you ſhould not have vowed, than that you ſhould vow, and not pay. Be entreated immediately to *pay unto the Lord your vows*, leſt, ſooner or later, this dreadful ſentence be ſounded in the ears of each preſumptuous delinquent, *What haſt thou to do to declare my ſtatutes, or that thou ſhouldeſt take my covenant in thy mouth; ſeeing thou hateſt*

inſtruction, and caſteſt my words behind thee? Thou giveſt thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. Theſe things haſt thou done, and I kept ſilence. Thou thoughteſt, that I was altogether ſuch a one as thyſelf. But I will reprove thee, and ſet them in order before thine eyes. Now conſider this, ye, that forget God, leſt I tear you in pieces, and there be none to deliver.